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Capitalist Crisis Creates Chaos

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Analysis: U.S. ruling class tightens grip to hold power

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What is happening in America?

The question undoubtedly crossed the minds of millions of people recently as they learned about an FBI informant shooting at the President, the CIA's manufacturing of poison dart guns and opening Richard Nixon's mail and a millionaire heiress claiming she was brainwashed into terrorism.

It all gave the impression of a ruling class falling apart at the seams, of a government unable to govern.

Nor was it simply a week of extraordinary exceptions. The progress of events had built up for more than a decade—the Kennedy and King assassinations, the Vietnam upheaval and U.S. defeat, Watergate and the resignations of Nixon and Agnew.

At present the CIA remains at the center of controversy and contention within the ruling class. Beginning with the exposure over a year ago of its role in the Chilean coup and continuing through the revelations of domestic spying, internal purges, defections and assassinations, the secret police agency has been spotlighted as never before.

"More than a quarter-century worth of skeletons have tumbled from the agency's closet," noted the Sept. 29 Time. "Today the CIA is the least secret espionage service in the world."

But the CIA has not been the first to come under fire. "When the Chile story broke last year," added Time, "the military and foreign policy establishments had met their Vietnam. The presidency had met its Watergate. Congress was reasserting itself. The CIA was the obvious next candidate for scrutiny."

"Scrutiny" is hardly the word for it. What is transpiring is an intensive struggle for the reorganization of power within the ruling class, for the rectification of policies which have met with defeat and for preparations for new wars born of interimperialist rivalry over a redivision of the world.

The problem for the bourgeoisie is that the defeats and setbacks of the immediate past have discredited old authorities before new authorities from within its ranks have been able to prove themselves. Support for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger within the government, for instance, as with Nixon's 1972 electoral base among the masses, is "a mile wide and an inch deep." It could evaporate overnight with the outbreak of a major conflict and is being regularly criticized and challenged by Defense Secretary James Schlesinger and Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.).

The result is a crisis of transition, a progress made all the more tenuous by the fact that the old regime of Nixon was dislodged, in part, through the mobilization of public opinion by rival monopoly groups bidding for power. But once certain weapons are used and various processes set into motion, they take on a life of their own and are difficult to control. As Karl Marx pointed out more than 100 years ago in his 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:

"The struggle of the orators on the [parliamentary] platform evokes the struggle of the scribblers of the press; the debating club in parliament is necessarily supplemented by debating clubs in the salons and pothouses; the representatives, who constantly appeal to public opinion, give public opinion the right to speak its real mind in petitions. The parliamentary regime leaves everything to the decision of majorities; how shall the great majorities outside parliament not want to decide? When you play the fiddle at the top of the state, what else is to be expected but that those down below dance?"

Thus Ford, who came into office on a wave of sentiment against "coverups" and "executive privilege," now finds himself hamstrung in pressing forward these same techniques in defense of the CIA and his own administration.